



Proposed Land Acquisition/Airspace Establishment in Support of Large-Scale MAGTF Live Fire and Maneuver Training

Project Update Notice Number 11—February 2012

**Marine Air Ground Task Force Training Command
Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center
Twentynine Palms, CA**

The Project Update Notices offer a focused way to provide easily accessible, wide-spread distribution of new Project information.

They augment the regular updating of key Project public documents carried on MCAGCC's Land Acquisition Study webpage.

Please see these other Project documents for an overview and key background information.

BACKGROUND

Training is how we prepare our Marines for combat. We must train as we fight. From lessons learned in combat operations and in response to evolution in war-fighting doctrine, the Marine Corps identified the need for sustained, integrated live-fire, combined-arms training for a large-scale Marine Air Ground Task Force, in particular, a Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB).

No existing military installation in the United States has the land and corresponding air-space necessary for such MEB training, which involves between 15,000 and 18,000 personnel in the MEB headquarters and ground-, air-, logistics-combat elements. In 2004, the Center for Naval Analyses determined the Marine Air Ground Combat Center (MCAGCC), Twentynine Palms, was the only base that could support the required MEB training, but only if expanded. As a result, the Marine Requirements Oversight Council approved a study of potential land expansion and air-space establishment alternatives.

The Marine Corps is following the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process to study the environmental impacts of a reasonable range of alternatives, which includes public review and comment on issues and proposed alternatives. The Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) is scheduled to be published late Spring 2012 and the Record of Decision (ROD) is scheduled to follow in mid Summer 2012.

The Marine Corps has a strong record of stewardship for cultural and natural resources at MCAGCC 29 Palms and we are committed to continuing this proud record of excellence on any newly acquired lands. We remain committed to being a good neighbor in the High Desert.

KEY PROJECT DEVELOPMENTS AND FACTS

- After more than 5 years of intensive analysis, the Marine Corps will release a Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) in April of 2012. This will complete the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requirement to analyze the effects of the USMC Proposed Action on the environment, including on natural and cultural resources and socio-economic impacts on surrounding communities.
- The Marine Corps has welcomed and evaluated the over 43,000 public comments received during the development of the EIS. We have conducted our analyses and developed alternatives, including the Preferred Alternative, in response to those comments, the vast majority of which concerned potential loss of use of the Johnson Valley Off Highway Vehicle Recreation Area.
- The Preferred Alternative, which would acquire approximately 168,000 acres, would allow continued public access to approximately 40,000 acres of important recreation areas that would become part of the installation and the Marine Corps would return special use airspace to the National Airspace System when not needed for training, as we do now.
- The Preferred Alternative seeks to avoid or minimize the impacts of this proposed action on the environment and the nearby communities, and to mitigate unavoidable impacts where appropriate.

For Further Information Please Contact

29Palms Training Land/Airspace Acquisition Project

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Project Update Notice—Issue #11

- We believe the Preferred Alternative is the optimal alternative given both operational and environmental impact factors, and balances economic, technical, environmental, and Marine Corps' statutory mission concerns.
- The FEIS analyzed the potential impacts of the project on lands to the west, south and east contiguous to the Combat Center. Analyses that led to the selection of the alternatives studied showed that lands to the north could not support MEB training. About 85% of the study area is federal land managed by the Bureau of Land Management; the remainder is state or privately held.
- If the Record of Decision (ROD) by the Secretary of the Navy supports moving forward, Congress would be asked to withdraw the federal lands from other uses so they can be reserved for military training. Congress must approve the withdrawal of public lands. The ROD would also allow for negotiations to purchase any private or state lands in the selected area.
- If the USMC Preferred Alternative moves forward, about 44% of today's Johnson Valley Off Highway Vehicle Area would remain open to the estimated 250,000 annual visitors who come to it for its recreational uses, including organized events such as the annual King of the Hammers race.
- Approximately 40,000 acres of the USMC acquired lands would be used for MEB training two months a year, and would be available 10 months a year for recreation uses. No dud-producing ordnance would be used in this area, and once the range is cleared for public access after MEB training, it would be available for public use.
- Specific areas of interest:
 - Desert Tortoise – Our studies show that there would be a potential significant impact to the desert tortoise. We are consulting with the US Fish and Wildlife Service to mitigate adverse effects to the desert tortoise. The Combat Center today has a tremendous record of managing desert tortoise habitats while conducting military training.
 - Noise – The new area would bring the “sound of training” further west, so some residents would hear “new” noise. The study of noise in the FEIS shows that any significant noise would be contained on the Combat Center.
 - Special Use Airspace: Ongoing coordination with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) should result in a timely and reasonable airspace solution that balances the high use of nearby air routes by commercial aviation and USMC training requirements. Following the ROD, FAA would commence its formal Rule Making and NEPA processes, which should be accelerated by cooperation to date.
- Marine Corps Air-Ground Combat Center, Twentynine Palms is approximately 598,000 acres in size, only 40 percent of which is suitable for training due to safety, environmental or terrain constraints.
- At this time, the existing Combat Center cannot meet the training requirement for three infantry battalions with supporting elements to move abreast toward an objective for 48-72 hours with unconstrained maneuver and integrated live-fire.
- Other MEB training alternatives were considered, including at installations in the Southeast and Gulf Coast, doing only simulated training, and in eight other alternatives in the vicinity of MCAGCC. These alternatives were not studied in detail because they would not meet the project need. For example, wilderness areas near the Base borders were not considered in the alternatives proposed by the Marine Corps for study as these lands are considered to be unavailable and therefore not a reasonable alternative under NEPA.
- Any non-federal land interests – i.e., state and private land interests – would be purchased at fair market value through the Marine Corps Military Construction Program.
- The Marine Corps transmitted a land withdrawal application to the Department of the Interior on 14 Aug 2008. The notice of segregation of lands from further claims was published on 15 Sep. 2008. Continued recreation use has been allowed during the segregation and withdrawal in aid of legislation study period.

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